

Waterloo Courier

By Tina Hinz

WATERLOO - U.S. 1st District Rep. Bruce Braley traveled to Iraq over the weekend and said it appears the U.S. withdrawal of combat troops is going as planned.

All but 50,000 soldiers are scheduled to pull out of Iraq by Aug. 31, 2010. The remaining U.S. forces will leave by the end of 2011 under an Iraqi-U.S. security pact.

"There is still a lot of ongoing work to meet the benchmarks as part of the force agreement," Braley, a Democrat from Waterloo, said during a conference call Wednesday. "It was obvious from everyone we spoke to that the United States military is dedicated to realizing that, not only in terms of the removal of military personnel but also equipment."

While challenges remain, a detailed plan is in place to make that happen, he said. Mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles, for example, are being assessed and retrofitted with independent rear suspensions and other improvements. They will eventually be shipped

to Afghanistan.

While Iraq is much more stable than it was three or four years ago, the upcoming national election will help determine whether the growing democratic government can stand on its own, Braley said.

"You've got a lot of outside interest groups and countries trying to influence the outcome of that election," Braley said.

The congressman added that the Iraqi police force, long considered a weak link, has made enormous strides. Areas of significant concern lie in border enforcement, particularly along the Iranian border, and incidents involving vandalism and theft of Iraqi oil and natural gas supplies.

"Historically, the porous border has been the biggest source of inflow of weapons and outside insurgents," Braley said. "Those two security entities have a history that lends itself to the ongoing problems with bribery and corruption."

Braley encountered many Iowans serving in Iraq, including some U.S. Army cavalry troops and two pilots with the Des Moines-based 132nd Fighter Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard. The guard unit is at Joint Base Balad. Braley watched two of its F-16 aircrafts taxi down the runway and take off.

Later at the Balad-based surgical hospital, Braley signed the warrior wall near the red bull insignia of the Iowa Army National Guard 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry.

The Waterloo-headquartered unit, part of the 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division, served 17 months in Iraq as part of a 22-month deployment in 2005-07. Two battalion members were killed in combat, and approximately 35 were wounded during the deployment.

"It was a very visible presence of Iowans making a difference in our national defense," Braley said.